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On the Job in a God-Centered World: Understanding Everyday Work in the New Testament

THOMAS ROBINSON

The world of daily work was the world in which the New Testament was written. It was an environment of hard labor, craftsmanship, accumulation of wealth, and toiling slaves, and it provided abundant images and instructions for early Christians.

Work in all its variety and stratification is simply assumed. It was everywhere in ordinary life. For all kinds of people, work gave expression to their life choices and life possibilities, to their creativity, their place in life's pecking order, their resources for securing the future, and many other nuances of life.

The concept of work was by no means limited to wage-earning jobs or professions. All the activities by which people sustained and secured their lives and expressed their values and desires flowed into this vast social phenomenon. Work in one form or another consumed most of the waking hours of most days for most people. Some people received direct income from their work—people such as hired laborers, craftsmen, and merchants. The work of others was not directly paid—for example, the work of the propertied classes, work done as voluntary service, slave work, and most of the work of women. But practically all work was done in order to create some value.

The connection between work and money along with the simple principle that a laborer deserves his pay (Luke 10:7; Rom 4:4; 1 Cor 9:7-10; 1 Tim 5:17) made work very important. Then as now, work was a means by which people exchanged their life—time, energy, and ability—for resources that could be used to obtain things needed or desired. Work consumes life, and what people strive to gain through the payment of their day-by-day lives shows what they consider most important. In Luke, Jesus warned his hearers, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). And in John, he urged, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life” (John 6:27).

In the New Testament, work is not a special category of life that must be interpreted through a distinct “theology of work.” Rather, work is life, and all the fundamental theological understandings that interpret and give meaning to life give meaning to work as well. This truth became especially clear for early

Christians, who experienced a fundamental change in their understanding of life through their faith in Jesus. They underwent a reorientation so radical that it was like death and resurrection or a new creation. In that change, the believer’s experience of work was profoundly altered.

Work was in the world, of course, long before Jesus’ birth. Indeed, God’s work in the world is fundamental to the entire Hebrew scripture from the Genesis creation to the end. And yet Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection—seen as God’s central



act of self-giving love for all time—challenged believers to re-envision their entire story and life. They had to look at everything anew—scriptures, history, work, ethnicity, everything—in the light of this new revelation. Throughout the New Testament, early Christians are seen engaged in this great quest, led and driven by the Holy Spirit.

This new understanding of work unfolds through diverse narratives and instructions as the New Testament writers opened to their readers a new vision of life under the reign of God. All kinds of issues surface, for example, the way anxiety and worry or greed and love of wealth motivate work, the temptation to abuse power and mistreat subordinates, the importance of generosity in handling earnings, the importance of fairness in paying workers, or the destructive impact of willful idleness. In each case the task was the same, envisioning a life based on the core values of the gospel. What does life—including work-life—look like in a world that places God and God's love and grace at the center of all values and in which God is the most active worker of all? What does a Christian's everyday work look like when every action is consciously performed for Christ by one who is a devoted servant of the Lord (Col 3:17, 23-24)?

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Christians asked these questions without cynicism and with sober realism. All work, no matter how ordinary, was touched by the process of new creation (Rom 12.1-2). But Christians knew they were still living in a world marked by long established structures of power hostile to God, by ingrained definitions of success and failure, by a system that rewarded wealth and punished humility, by a class-based society built on the backs of slaves and the poor. This structure gave its own value to work—identifying whose work was significant and rewarded.

But while living in that world, the disciples remembered and retold the story of Jesus. The one whom they knew was embodiment of God's eternal love and power lived at the bottom of that entire structure of power. It was there he was born, lived out the reign of God with joy and service, and died at the hands of the religious and powerful. If Jesus were true, nothing, not even the most mundane areas of life could ever be the same. God had established a new standard of what is real and what lasts. The work of a king, a hired plowman, a woman serving a meal, a merchant, even a slave, all now had to be seen in the light of that reality.

THE POWERFUL

The images of work in the New Testament touch all strata of society. In the apparently highest stratum was the work of those who exercised great power—kings and rulers who embodied the world's stark rivalry to the God-centered world of Jesus. Though Jesus could use good kings as characters in his parables (Matt 18:23-27; 22:2), the actual rulers who came into contact with Jesus or his disciples in the Gospels or Acts were practically always negative characters. The stories of such rulers are marked by irony and condemnation. Herod the Great, for example, appears first in Matthew's birth narrative as a king of the Jews threatened by the Magi's inquiry about the birth of a "king of the Jews" (Matt 2:2-3). He has power to summon chief priests and scribes to interpret prophecies; he can dispatch soldiers to slaughter babies in Bethlehem, but his raging power is impotent to destroy the child. Luke uses a similar irony in his birth narrative, when Emperor Augustus, the mightiest of the mighty, gives a decree that mobilizes the entire Roman Empire for a census, but it simply serves to move Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that prophecy may be fulfilled (Luke 2:1-4).

Most of the powerful men and women in the New Testament reveal the weakness, self-deception, or self-aggrandizing foolishness of human power in contrast to the surprising and effective power of God. Whether it is the ignorance and foolishness of Herod Antipas (Mark 6:13-28; Luke 23:7-11), the coward-

ice of Pontius Pilate, the hubris of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1-23), the corruption of Felix (Acts 24:26), or the dismissive cynicism of Agrippa II (Acts 26:28), character flaws of the mighty show the corruption and weakness at the core of their apparent power.

Against the work of such power, narratives of Jesus portray the unexpected work of true power in self-giving service. Perhaps the most vivid story is the Last Supper in John 13. The narrative begins by emphasizing Jesus' consciousness that "the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God" (John 13:3). What does one do when one realizes the possession of all power? Jesus disrobed, got down on his knees, and washed his disciples' feet. In this way he showed what real power—the glory and power of God—looks like when it is manifested in this world. It was no wonder the mighty of this world, such as Pilate, could not begin to grasp who he was or what he meant.

It is among people of power on a level of authority several rungs below kings and governors that the New Testament shows examples of more openness and self-effacing clarity about the limits of power. Matthew tells of a centurion in Capernaum who knew how to exercise authority. He recognized that no one in the power structure above him could help him with his paralyzed servant but that Jesus' authority was of a wholly different order, one that made him feel unworthy to have Jesus enter his home (Matt 8:5-13). Again, from the court of Herod Antipas, Luke tells of "Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza," who became a disciple of Jesus (Luke 8:3), and of "Manaen a member of the court of Herod," who was a church leader in Antioch (Acts 13:1).

THE WEALTHY

Power and wealth regularly go together. The Galilee and Judea of Jesus' day knew many wealthy land-owners, absentee landlords, aristocrats, chief priests, international merchants, chief tax collectors, etc., and Jesus regularly used such characters in his parables. Given the nature of economic forces in the Roman Empire, the wealth of such individuals was most often accumulated through oppressive and dishonest practices. The letter of James reflects the justifiable assumption that the wealth of the rich was obtained by defrauding laborers:

Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. (Jas 5:4-5)

Similarly, Jesus warned, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry" (Luke 6:24-25). Jesus warned that wealth was a rival god (Mammon) that kept people from devotion to the one God (Matt 6:24).

Such warnings, however, did not keep Jesus from loving wealthy people and calling them to be his disciples. When Jesus urged one wealthy young man to sell his possession and give to the poor, the man turned away from Jesus, unable to part with his money (Mark 10:17-25). In the case of the wealthy tax collector, Zacchaeus, however, Jesus found a receptive heart. Zacchaeus repaid those he had defrauded and found salvation (Luke 19:1-10). Similarly, such wealthy religious leaders as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea became believers in Jesus during his ministry, but their positions of prominence kept them from fully committing their lives to discipleship.

As the church grew, wealth continued to be a challenge. The wealthy Barnabas gave land to help support the poor, while Ananias and Sapphira tried to gain praise by pretending to give more than they had (Acts 4:36-5.10). In Greece and Asia Minor, the gospel evidently made a strong impact on wealthy women, who sometimes became believers while their husbands remained pagan (Acts 17:4). Paul indicates that very few of the Corinthians were wealthy or powerful, though their misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper suggests

a strong class consciousness (1 Cor 1:26-27, 11:20-21). The exhortations in 1 Tim 6:17-19 indicate the presence of wealthy Christians and the challenges that face them, while James 2:1-7 warns the church about a growing tendency to give places of prominence to the rich.

CRAFTSMEN AND LABORERS

It is from the vast ranks of people who were neither powerful nor wealthy that the great majority of Jesus' followers came. Jesus himself was evidently a carpenter (Mark 6:3) as was Joseph before him (Matt 13:55), though he never alludes to carpentry throughout his teaching. Four of his disciples were fishermen; another was a low-ranking tax collector. Paul was a tentmaker who continued to work at his craft along with other tentmakers such as Aquila and Priscilla, even while he was establishing churches in numerous cities (Acts 18:1-3). Jesus' parables are full of characters who are similar workers: tenant farmers, plowmen, sowers, reapers, threshers, winnowers, shepherds, fishermen, vineyard keepers, priests, Levites, hired hands, pearl merchants, housekeepers, bread bakers, grinders of grain, builders, etc. Many other such workers are mentioned: potters, spinners, weavers, tanners, sewers of clothes, soldiers, money changers, sellers of birds and sacrificial animals, teachers, scribes, sailors, ship captains, stewards, magicians, sorcerers, stonecutters, masons, musicians, prophets, jailers, etc.

In his parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), Jesus used the common sense of justice involved in giving fair wages to hired laborers as a foil to provide a contrast with the ways of God. Workers earn their pay, and the workers in the parable expected the pay to be divided in proportion to the hours worked. But with God, the issue is never one of fair pay for work done; it is always a question of generosity and grace. Out of his generosity, the employer gave the workers far more than anyone would have expected.

CRAFTSMAN AND APOSTLE

Paul regularly used the language of the craftsman or worker to interpret the work of ministry for him and others. God was the master worker, the one whose skill and strength accomplished everything. Paul and other teachers were coworkers assigned by God to various tasks. In 1 Cor 3:5-15, Paul began explaining the roles of himself and Apollos as agricultural workers: Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. He then turned to the language of builders: As a "skilled master builder" he had laid the foundation that God had given him, namely, Jesus Christ. Apollos and others would build on the foundation and God would test the quality of each person's work. In a third set of metaphors, he called himself and Apollos "stewards of the mysteries of God," assistants of Christ who were required to be trustworthy (1 Cor 4:1-2).

For Paul the concept of his ministry as a craft went very deep. Not unlike his tentmaking, Paul saw his work as an apostle as a skilled calling assigned to

him by God. As a former persecutor, he was unworthy of apostleship, but God's grace had given him the assignment, and as Paul said, "His grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor 15:10).

That hard work had a special meaning for Paul. His work as an apostle interlinked intimately with

his craft as a tentmaker. The basic justice that a laborer deserves his pay meant that as a worker for the gospel, Paul had a right to be paid by those he preached to. But Paul determined never to take money from the people in a church he was establishing. He wanted to "make the gospel free of charge" (1 Cor 9:18). In place of such pay, he substituted his own work with his hands, which served to support both himself and some of those with him.

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His life as a craftsman was integrated into his apostleship as an ongoing act of generosity and as an example of hard work performed in order to give to others. Thus he wrote to the Thessalonians, "You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God" (1 Thess 2:9). Luke reported that Paul said to the church elders from Ephesus:

You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:34-35).

Work for money became an expression of the gospel as it became work for the resources to express self-giving love through generosity to others.

UNDER THE YOKE OF SLAVERY

At the very bottom of the hierarchy of power in that society were the slaves. These were often captives of war or kidnap victims or their descendants. (In terms of access to power, the situation of dependent free women was often very similar to that of slaves, though their living conditions might be more comfortable depending on the wealth of husbands or fathers.) The work of slaves was not their own—just as their bodies were not their own. They were living tools to be used (and abused) by their masters. They were those in society who labored hardest and those whose labor was most likely to have no positive meaning to them at all. Everything depended on their masters, and thus they were often alienated from themselves and their own work.

In the New Testament, the phenomenon of slavery is taken as a given, as indeed it was. No one in the strata of society in which Jesus and the early church lived had any power at all to change the basic structures of slavery. Slaves were everywhere, in the parables of Jesus, in the language of self-description of early Christians, and all around in real life. But the gospel was proclaimed to slaves and was very attractive to slaves. They became part of a community in which they could be treated as equals, as brothers and sisters

to people who were on the other side of the great chasm that cut through ancient society separating slave and free.

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Every believer belonged entirely to God, and thus everyone, from the most mature apostle to the newest convert, was a slave of Christ. Such language was no doubt far more loaded for early Christians than for us. It was consciously used to express the reversal of values at the heart of the gospel. Slavery to Christ is both obedience and free-

dom, a relationship of profound love and fulfillment, abundance of life. In the opening words of Romans, Paul calls himself first "a slave of Christ Jesus" and only then a called apostle. Slaves who became disciples were considered "freed" by Christ just as a citizen like Paul was considered a slave: a new reality that turned the world upside down (1 Cor 7:22).

Still, what was a slave to do with the daily drudgery of meaningless, hard, and unjust work punctuated by punishment at the whim of their master? The guidance given to slaves in several New Testament letters challenged them to live as completely as possible within the reality of their new life in Christ. In very few instances could they control or change their external circumstances, but their new relationship could change

completely the reality they experienced within themselves, a reality shaped by the eternal love and grace of their new master.

Like all believers, slaves had been called by God to service and self-giving love. Such service was to be given freely as service to Christ: "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men" (Col 2:23; Eph 6:6-7). They were not to live in reaction to the evil that could overwhelm and embitter their lives but to live as servants of God. The injustice and suffering of their condition corresponded to the suffering of Christ, whose wounds had healed their souls and who was now their shepherd and guardian (1 Pet 2:21-25).

In the aftermath of all the slavery and abuse practiced in western societies through the centuries, it would be easy to be cynical when hearing such words of guidance. Such cynicism is misplaced. The guidance came from real communities that included many slaves in full participation within the communities. The instructions were not intended to pacify the slaves but to allow them to live out the joy of their salvation, independent of the circumstances that surrounded them. They are simply one of the most explicit and striking examples of the vision of a God-centered life that permeates the New Testament.

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